

To: The Chairman and members of the Government Administration and Elections Committee

From: Anne Cushman Schwaikert, Democratic Registrar, Woodbury  
Judith Henderson, Republican Registrar of Voters, Woodbury

Thank you very much for permitting us to offer our perspectives on the two pieces of legislation before this committee that involve the position of Registrar, specifically:

H.B. No. 6904 (RAISED) AN ACT CONCERNING APPOINTMENT OF REGISTRARS OF VOTERS.

S.B. No. 1051 (RAISED) AN ACT STRENGTHENING CONNECTICUT'S ELECTIONS.

We know -- and freely acknowledge -- that in the past four or five years there have been some major problems with a small number of registrar office operations and the conduct of elections in a few large municipalities resulting in media coverage that has been an embarrassment for us as registrars as well as a burden for the Secretary of the State's Office. In these situations, poor decision-making, insufficiently trained personnel and inappropriate partisan conduct on the part of registrars were, regrettably, on display. We agree with the Secretary of the State's office that some corrective action must be put in place to ensure that incidents like these do not recur.

We also know that some of our number are not sufficiently competent or comfortable with the increasing importance of technology to our jobs. Again, we are on the same page with the Secretary of the State's office. This must change.

But we feel it essential to point out that despite the problems with registrars in some districts that tend to make the headlines, in the vast majority of Connecticut's 169 municipalities, the registrars leave politics at the door of the registry office and focus on keeping the most accurate records we can, providing citizens and local organizations with lists and other information they request and, to the best of their ability, running fair, impartial and efficient elections and referenda. And, we welcome the opportunity that technology and our competency with it brings us to operate more effectively and efficiently..

Therefore, we're sure it's no surprise to you that our position is to reject HB 6904 in its entirety, as well as the duplicate language in the Senate bill 1051.

Our reasons are as follows:

- Such a draconian approach to the registrar function will penalize the great majority of registrars who are conscientious in the performance of their duties. For the few registrars who have violated the public trust, we agree that there

should be a mechanism to remove/replace them, which we understand is in progress.

- Having elected registrars of differing parties is designed to provide a constant system of checks and balances that is readily apparent to municipal leadership and the public. Whether running elections or conducting the day to day operations of the office, anyone needing something of the office should feel that they have equal access to what the registrars have to offer. We don't believe a single registrar, appointed by and representing, the party in power, can offer the public the same assumption of impartiality.
- The importance of the public's perception of the Elections Process as being fair and impartial is essential both to people's willingness to turn out and trust in the results. In survey after survey asking non-voters why they didn't go to the polls, an often-cited reason is that they don't think their vote counts because, as some say, "The guys in power always win." Replacing the current system of two registrars of two different parties by one registrar appointed by municipal leadership -- by implication, by the party in power -- could increase voter distrust in the results

Registrars and poll workers are often asked what we are doing to ensure the integrity of what happens at the ballot box. When we tell voters that every function and step is done and overseen by workers of different parties -- for example, the removal of ballots from a full ballot box or delivering a ballot to a curbside voter -- they generally express greater confidence in the process..

- Under the current system, municipal elections take place every two years. With some towns changing parties in power at nearly every election, there would be the potential of having to change registrars every two years as well. The job of registrar can be complex -- and it really takes a full election cycle (4 years) to before the registrar has experience of all types of elections and can expect public confidence in that registrar's abilities That confidence could erode pretty quickly if registrars keep changing.

In terms of the Senate Bill , Raised Bill No. 1051, An Act Strengthening Connecticut's Elections...

Section 1 -- We are opposed to this section for the reasons given above for the House bill. Basically, we feel it is a draconian measure that will not in itself guarantee the improved electoral process that is its prime objective.

That having been said, the balance of the bill contains much that we favor, especially sections referring to educational/experiential criteria for prospective registrars, training and certification of registrars as well as the clarification of our duties Were these to be passed without Section 1, the result would be a greatly improved registrar -- while keeping the current configuration of two elected registrars of differing parties.

In terms of local government having the authority to replace registrars who fail to do their jobs, we could support the provision in the Senate Bill, provided that it includes language that dismissal of the incumbents be 'for cause', i.e., violation of Title 9 provisions or local ordinance, demonstrated incompetence or proof of falsification of qualifications -- and that the appointments would be effective only until the next registrar Election.

In closing, we just want to say again that, by and large, Connecticut's registrars of voters are dedicated individuals who share the Secretary of the State's and the Legislature's desire to make Connecticut's elections examples of fairness, professionalism and accuracy that will make all of us proud. And if we all work together to improve registrar capabilities and training, we will do just that.

Thank you...